

Testimony Opposing S.B. 877, An Act Concerning The Entrance Age for When a Child May Enter Kindergarten

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Education Committee

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Senator Stillman, Representative Fleischmann, and distinguished Members of the Education Committee:

We are testifying today on behalf of Connecticut Voices for Children, an independent, research-based public education and advocacy organization that works statewide to promote the well-being of Connecticut's children, youth, and families.

We laud your commitment to ensuring that all children enter kindergarten ready to learn and be successful. **However, Connecticut Voices for Children strongly opposes S.B. 877, which would move back the school entrance age for kindergarteners without providing a clear plan for serving the displaced children.**

This body considered a similar measure two years ago. Recognizing the problems with the legislation – in particular the cost to parents of paying for an additional year of child care, and the harm to those children who would spend an additional year outside of any kind of structured educational setting – you wisely chose not to move forward with the proposal at that time. Instead, the Achievement Gap Task Force was charged with developing a plan to ensure that all children displaced from kindergarten would have access to high-quality preschool. The task force has not produced this plan. The bill before you does not contain a plan (it calls for the creation of one, this time by the Commissioner of Education and the early childhood planning director), and more importantly, it does not guarantee any funding to support such a plan.

We strongly urge you to oppose any legislation that seeks to change the age of kindergarten eligibility without a clear funded plan already completed for how the state will continue to serve the young kindergarteners barred from enrolling for a year. If the goal is to ensure that all children are successful in kindergarten and able to transition to first grade, there are a number of other measures that we would recommend instead, which would be less costly and have ample research to support their effectiveness.

Moving back the kindergarten entrance age cutoff will worsen the achievement gap.

Research shows that low-income students start off behind their higher-income counterparts primarily because they have less preparation, not because they are younger.¹ Holding back students without providing universal access to high-quality preschool means the most vulnerable students will fall even further behind their classmates. Middle-class and affluent children will progress more during an additional year of “waiting” to start kindergarten than their low-income counterparts, due

¹ Todd Elder and Darren H. Lubotsky. 2008. “Kindergarten Entrance Age and Children’s Achievement: Impacts of State Policies, Family Background, and Peers.” (available at [http://web4.uwindsor.ca/users/a/arbex/main.nsf/0/d71f84892f3e76368525754000535d61/\\$FILE/Elder08.pdf](http://web4.uwindsor.ca/users/a/arbex/main.nsf/0/d71f84892f3e76368525754000535d61/$FILE/Elder08.pdf) on p. 5)

largely to the fact that they are more likely to receive high-quality preschool during that time period.² As the school entrance age effect is larger for children of higher socioeconomic status, moving up the entrance age is likely to have “the perverse effect of exacerbating socioeconomic differences in school performance.”³

Low-income children are better off in school than out. There is evidence that parents of low-income children are less likely to read to their children,⁴ and less likely to be able to provide them with a high-quality preschool experience.⁵ Since the benefits of delayed enrollment result primarily from an additional year of human capital accumulation, changing the entrance age is least likely to improve the achievement of those most at-risk since they receive the least human capital investment prior to entering school.⁶ Additionally, studies show that children’s reading and math abilities increase much more quickly once they begin kindergarten than they would have increased during the same period if they delayed kindergarten entry.⁷ Therefore, increases in kindergarten entrance ages have the primary effect of delaying the rapid learning that children experience once they begin school, especially for students from low-income households.⁸

While it is true that age at kindergarten entrance has a small impact on academic performance, the effect becomes less significant as students age and is small compared to the impact of family socioeconomic status and preschool experiences. One study found that the proportion of risk to achievement attributed to race and socio-economic status is 13 times that contributed by age.⁹ Other studies that have found that age-of-entry effects are dwarfed by other aspects of family and child care experiences.¹⁰ In most cases, controlling for demographic, socioeconomic, and developmental factors eliminates most differences between delayed-entry students and others.¹¹ In other words, younger kindergarteners tend to perform more poorly not because they are younger, but because their age is correlated with the things that really matter: preschool experience, maternal education, and socioeconomic status. Changing the date of kindergarten eligibility does not address the real challenges these children face.

² Ashlesha Datar. “The Impact of Changes in Kindergarten Entrance Age Policies on Children’s Academic Achievement and the Child Care Needs of Families.” *Rand Corporation* (2005) (available at http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/rgs_dissertations/2005/RGSD177.pdf on p. 49-50)

³ Elder at 21.

⁴ Kathryn Taaffe Young et al., “Listening to Parents: A National Survey of Parents with Young Children,” *Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine* 152 (1998) on p. 258. Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics. “America’s Children: Key National Indicators of Well-Being, 2009.” Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics (2009), p. 49.

⁵ Datar at 49, citing Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 2001.

⁶ Elder at 33-34.

⁷ Elder at 7.

⁸ Elder at 7.

⁹ Deborah Stipek. “At What Age Should Children Enter Kindergarten: A Question for Policymakers and Parents.” *Social Policy Report* XVI:2 (2002), citing Molly M. Jones and Garrett K. Mandeville, “The Effect of Age at School Entry on Reading Achievement Scores Among South Carolina Students.” *Remedial and Special Education* March/April 1990 11: 56-62.

¹⁰ NICHD Early Child Care Research Network. Age of Entry to Kindergarten and Children’s Academic Achievement and Socioemotional Development. *Early Education & Development*, 18 (2007) 337-368. (available at <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2140009/pdf/nihms-32744.pdf> on p.1, 13-14)

¹¹ National Center for Education Statistics. “Children Who Enter Kindergarten Late or Repeat Kindergarten: Their Characteristics and Later School Performance.” *Stats in Brief*. NCES 2000-039. U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement (2000) (available at <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2000/2000039.pdf> on p. 3)

Younger kindergarteners do not suffer from any more social or emotional problems in school than their elder classmates. There is a myth that children with fall birthdays are not socially or emotionally prepared to enter kindergarten, have more difficulty paying attention, cooperating, and making friends, and experience more behavior problems. But there is no evidence to support this. To the contrary, studies suggest that age at kindergarten entrance is unrelated to any aspect of social functioning.¹² One longitudinal study, examining children from kindergarten through third grade, found no connection, in any grade, between age of kindergarten entry and a variety of social skills (including self-control, relationships with peers, and understanding of social boundaries) and behaviors (including aggression and anxiety).¹³ Other studies have similarly found no age effects on attention, anxiety, or classroom behavior for children from kindergarten through third and fourth grade.¹⁴

Having a later date for kindergarten eligibility than most other states does not disadvantage Connecticut in nation-wide comparisons. While it is true that Connecticut has one of the latest cut-offs for kindergarten entrance in the country, and that, over the last decade, many states have moved back their eligibility date, this in and of itself is not a reason to change the kindergarten entrance age. As noted above, any small differences in achievement at kindergarten entry that can rightfully be attributed to relative age disappear over time,¹⁵ so by the point children are taking nationwide standardized tests, the fact that Connecticut's student population may be relatively younger is irrelevant. While it makes sense to look to other states for best practices, it does not make sense to follow those practices of other states which impart no positive benefits for children and families and have tangible negative consequences instead.

Changing the date of kindergarten eligibility will be very costly – either for families or the state of Connecticut. In the absence of a plan to serve displaced children, this proposal is tantamount to a new tax on Connecticut's working families, forcing them to pay for an additional, unplanned year of child care.¹⁶ In 2011, 70% of Connecticut children lived in families where all parents were working or looking for work.¹⁷ Child care in Connecticut is prohibitively expensive, consuming up to 29% of a basic family budget in a two parent, two child family.¹⁸ For families unable to afford the high cost of an additional year of childcare, the proposed legislation would serve as a barrier to productive employment.¹⁹

The State Department of Education has previously estimated that moving back the kindergarten entrance age cutoff would keep up to 10,000 children out of kindergarten for an extra year.²⁰

¹² NIHCD at 14, 16. Stipek at 10.

¹³ NIHCD at 10-11.

¹⁴ Stipek at 10 (citing Stipek & Byler 2001; Kinard & Reinherz 1986).

¹⁵ Stipek at 1.

¹⁶ Datar at 50.

¹⁷ U.S. Census Bureau. 2011 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates. Table B23008: Age of Own Children Under 18 Years in Families and Subfamilies by Living Arrangements by Employment Status of Parents.

¹⁸ Sarah Esty and Cyd Oppenheimer. "Connecticut Early Care & Education Progress Report, 2011." *Connecticut Voices for Children* (Dec 2011) (available at: <http://www.ctvoices.org/publications/connecticut-early-care-and-education-progress-report-2011>, page 10)

¹⁹ Public school enrollment has been shown to significantly increase the labor market participation of mothers. See Jonah B. Gelbach. "Public Schooling for Young Children and Maternal Labor Supply." *The American Economic Review*. Mar., 2002, p. 307-322.

²⁰ This was the number relied upon by the Connecticut State Department of Education (SDE) in putting together its proposal two years ago, which we continue to rely upon both because a more updated figure is not available, and because kindergarten enrollment has remained relatively consistent in recent years. This estimate of the number of Connecticut Voices for Children

Lower-income families would be disproportionately affected, as students from higher-income districts are currently overrepresented among held kindergarteners.²¹ The average yearly cost for full-time care for a preschooler in a licensed child care center is \$10,681.²² Therefore, the total cost to families of this proposal is in the millions of dollars.

If the state were to adopt a plan to serve the displaced children through the School Readiness program, this would **incur costs of approximately \$60 million.**²³ When accounting for the cost of hiring new teachers and creating new facilities, costs to the state could soar even higher.

Moving back the kindergarten age without providing universal access to high quality preschool would punish students – particularly low-income students – and their families. Serving all those displaced children would likely be prohibitively expensive. There is no evidence to suggest that moving the age of kindergarten entry will benefit children, and ample research that shows it may worsen the achievement gap, hurt working parents, and prove very costly to the state. Consequently, we respectfully ask that you oppose SB 877.

There are a **number of measures we would recommend as less costly and more effective ways of promoting children’s success in kindergarten.** These include:

- Ensure that all children enter kindergarten with **two years of high quality preschool experience.**²⁴
- Require that **instruction in kindergarten be developmentally appropriate,** and fight “push-down” of curriculum from elementary school, which is inappropriate for kindergarteners of all ages.
- Improve communication between teachers and schools to **facilitate student transitions** into kindergarten and from kindergarten into first grade.
- Encourage **improved coordination between pre-school, kindergarten, and first grade** to better align curricula and expectations, as part of the broader “Age 3 – Grade 3” alignment movement.²⁵

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony.

students affected by a cutoff date of August 31 is based upon the number of students born between September 1 and December 31, 2004 enrolled in kindergarten in School Year 2009-2010. Data provided by Michelle Levy, SDE, received via email 2/7/11. Because month-to-month breakdowns of student dates-of-birth days were not available to us, we were unable to calculate the exact number of students affected by an October 1 cutoff.

²¹ Connecticut Voices for Children analysis of Connecticut State Department of Education (SDE) data on held kindergarteners by District Regional Group (DRG). Data provided by Michelle Levy, SDE, received via email 2/7/11. About 17% of kindergartners in Connecticut’s wealthiest communities (DRG A) do not enter school in their first year of eligibility, while in Connecticut’s poorest communities (DRG I), only about 3% of kindergartners do not enter school in their first year of eligibility.

²² 211 Child Care. “Fee Analysis of Child Care Facilities in Connecticut: February 5, 2013.” (available at <http://www.211childcare.org/professionals/FeeCT.asp>)

²³ This estimate takes the School Readiness reimbursement rate of \$6,000 per child for a school day/school year slot times 10,000 displaced students. See, “School Readiness Overview,” *Connecticut State Department of Education* (2012), available at: <http://www.sde.ct.gov/sde/lib/sde/PDF/DEPS/Readiness/sroverview.pdf>.

²⁴ The yearly unmet needs report from the State Department of Education estimates that approximately 5,000-6,000 children qualify for School Readiness but are unable to access a slot due to lack of space. See, “A Report of School Readiness Need and the Costs to Serve All 3- and 4-Year-Old Children in 19 Priority School Districts,” *Connecticut State Department of Education* (2012), available at:

http://www.sde.ct.gov/sde/lib/sde/PDF/DEPS/Readiness/SR_Report.pdf

²⁵ See <http://fcd-us.org/our-work/prek-3rd-education>.